

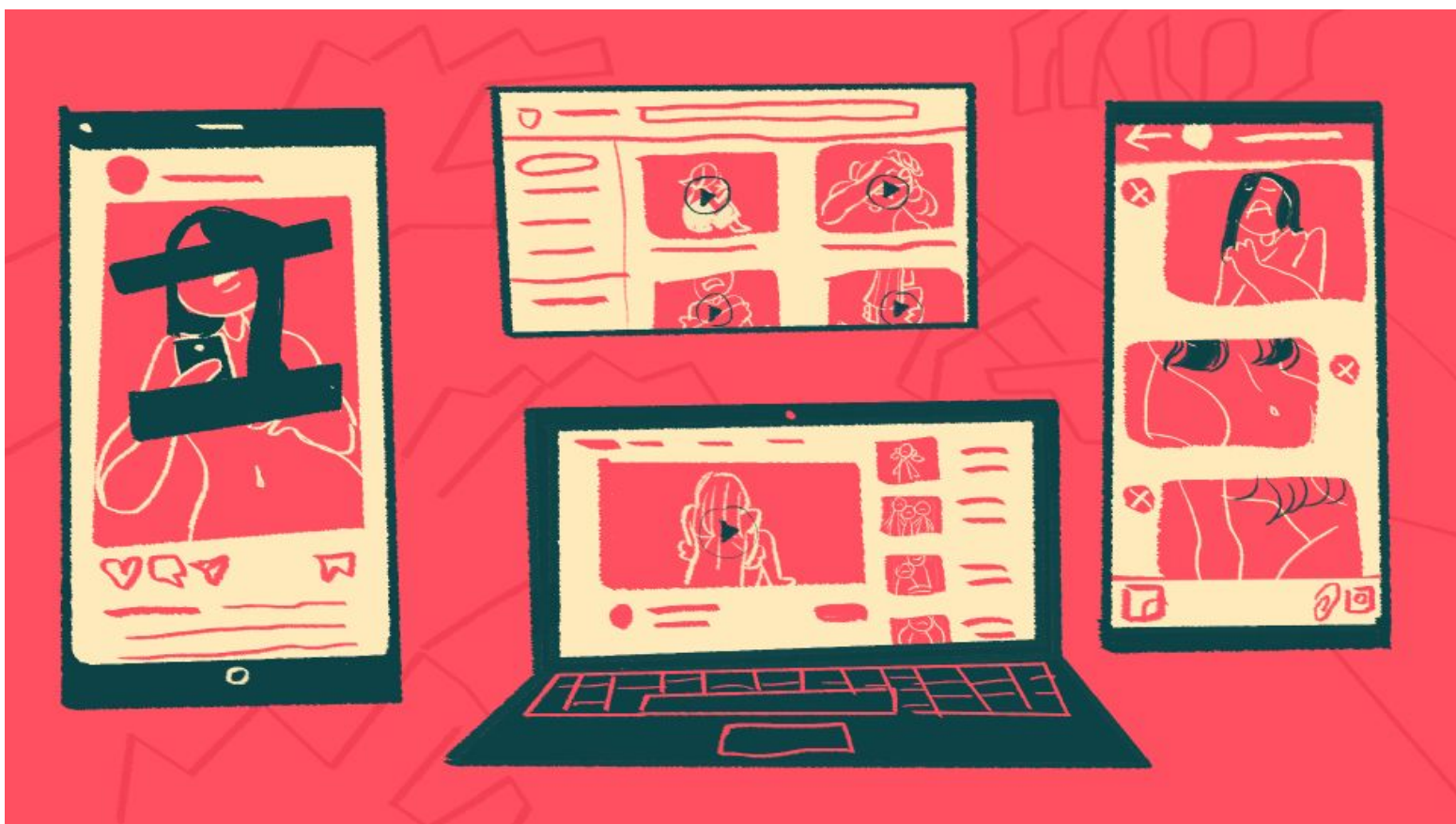
# Under quarantine, Filipino children and women are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation

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As the world tries to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been strong indicators showing the surge of online sexual exploitation of children because of the lockdowns. Illustration by KRISTIENNE AMANTE

**Manila (CNN Philippines Life)** — In 2016, Australian national I. Turner was arrested by the Queensland Police Taskforce for purchasing child sexual exploitation material, including live-stream videos from the Philippines.

The Australian Federal Police then alerted the Philippine National Police (PNP) of this case, prompting the latter to conduct surveillance of one of his suppliers, Vilma, who was based in Cebu. That same year, our local police implemented a search warrant and arrest at Vilma's residence.

It was revealed that Vilma had been communicating with overseas customers in Australia, Germany, and the United States through social media platforms and e-mail, in which she sells photos and live-streamed abuse of her own children. The investigation also discovered that she had been selling the materials for over five years.

One of her daughters said, in an affidavit, that she had lost count on how many live-stream videos she had been abused in. At the time of the rescue, all of them were minors, aged 7 to 11.

**Online exploitation during lockdown**

As the world tries to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been strong indicators showing the surge of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) because of the lockdowns. “Global law enforcement agencies have reported a rise in demand for child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM) coinciding with the time of lockdowns,” says Atty. Rey Lico, Manila Field Office Director of the International Justice Mission (IJM).

Lico also shared that the Australian Federal Police, for instance, received intelligence that CSEM sites were crashing due to increased user activity. European law agency Europol, on the other hand, also [reported](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-crime/online-child-sex-abuse-rises-with-covid-19-lockdowns-europol-idUSKBN22U1XK) (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-crime/online-child-sex-abuse-rises-with-covid-19-lockdowns-europol-idUSKBN22U1XK) that there was increased online activity seeking child sexual materials.

In the Philippines, from April 6 to June 12, there were 15 IJM-supported operations, in which 46 OSEC victims and children at risk were rescued, and 8 OSEC suspects arrested. “When you have an increase in demand for OSEC from abroad, and you have vulnerable children locked down with potential abusers and traffickers in the Philippines, we can reasonably assume a spike in OSEC incidence,” says Lico.

A report from the Department of Justice Office of Cybercrime also [said](https://www.rappler.com/nation/261906-doj-blames-telecoms-reports-sexual-abuse-children-triple-coronavirus-lockdown) (https://www.rappler.com/nation/261906-doj-blames-telecoms-reports-sexual-abuse-children-triple-coronavirus-lockdown) that on May 25, they received 279,166 cyber tips from the lockdown period of March to May 2020. The office only received 76,561 cyber tips in that same period last year, marking an over 200% increase.

However, even before the lockdown, the Philippines had already been identified as the global hotspot for online sexual exploitation of children. The IJM released a 2020 [study](https://www.ijm.org/documents/Final_OSEC-Public-Summary_05_20_2020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Jg4QA2hsve6VWLFf3_Wk58n33h5OOV6a9tlv3otaua9eB5Yp2PcGjNb0) (https://www.ijm.org/documents/Final\_OSEC-Public-Summary\_05\_20\_2020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Jg4QA2hsve6VWLFf3\_Wk58n33h5OOV6a9tlv3otaua9eB5Yp2PcGjNb0), which collected information from 2010 to 2017, where global law enforcement data shows that the Philippines was the largest known source country of cases, receiving more than eight times as many referrals as any other country.

That same study reveals that, of the 285 victims rescued in that time period, the median age is 11 years old, 41% of the crime was perpetrated by their biological parents, and 86% of the victims were females.

Maria Margarita Ardivilla, UNICEF’s Child Protection Specialist, says that the main drivers of the persistence of online sexual exploitation of children are poverty, our utility of the English language, and the erroneous notion that there is no violence caused because the body is not being touched.

“Eight out of 10 children have experienced violence in the past and most experienced it at home, the place where they should feel safe,” she says.

“With the lockdown and in the context of the pandemic, we are talking about the toxic brew of tremendous economic strain, being in confined spaces, mobility restrictions, and so it’s no surprise that there is an increase in the number of cases of violence against children during the quarantine period.”

## **Social media community**

While most of these cases are brought to light by law enforcement, social media users have also banded together to report and take down exploitative material on mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

[Bantay Bastos](https://www.facebook.com/groups/BantayBastosGroup/) (https://www.facebook.com/groups/BantayBastosGroup/), a volunteer-led Facebook page, started a Facebook group to systematize the deluge of child exploitation reports online. Shebana Alqaseer, one of the moderators of the group and also part of feminist platform Every Woman, says that, in the beginning, their goal was to mass report exploitative pages so they can be taken down.

However, the PNP’s child protection unit reached out to them, saying that they should document the reports first as the National Bureau of Investigation is tracking these accounts. “Kasi we need accountability, to have justice, so hindi siya pwedeng we just take them down on Facebook para hindi kumalat,” Alqaseer says. “It’s good that it’s taken down pero if hindi natin siya properly documented, hindi sila mahuhuli, and they’ll just create new pages.”

Since the lockdown, the group has been receiving five to 10 reports a day. Bantay Bastos also has a direct contact with the PNP where they forward all the reports for investigation. It became the group's protocol for those reporting to answer a Google form, which requires a screenshot and URL.

Alqaseer also shares that there have been users who supposedly lure more followers by exchanging a Facebook 'like' or 'follow' with an exploitative video of a child.

"Merong user na si [Josh\*], gumawa kasi siya ng Facebook group. Ang pang come-on sa mga tao, 'invite your friends to like this page and I'll send you the [sexually explicit] video via message,'" she says. "So what we did is expose not just him, but everybody who posted a comment that they wanted a video."

After being exposed, Bermudez reached out to Bantay Bastos, begging that the group take down their posts. "Sabi niya hindi naman daw niya alam na mali 'yung ginagawa niya at ginagawa lang niya para ma-boost yung page niya," Alqaseer shares.

While Bantay Bastos was firm in their resolve not to absolve Bermudez from his actions, Alqaseer does acknowledge that perhaps more people should know that these kinds of activities are wrong and criminal.

"Kailangan ng ganoong info campaign because even young people, what if they really don't know? Kasi ang daming real accounts 'yung mga humingi ng video," she says. "What if they don't know? Baka akala nila 'pag ikaw yung nagvideo, ikaw 'yung mali, but akala nila kung hinihingi mo, hindi criminal."

Anyone found guilty under the [Anti-Child Pornography Act](https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2009/11/17/republic-act-no-9775-s-2009/) (https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2009/11/17/republic-act-no-9775-s-2009/) is punishable with reclusion perpetua and a fine of not less than ₱2 million but not more than ₱5 million.

## Still part of women's issues

During the start of the lockdown, human rights groups and advocates have [warned](https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1265487/gender-related-violence-during-lockdown-can-now-be-reported-using-chrs-online-site) (https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1265487/gender-related-violence-during-lockdown-can-now-be-reported-using-chrs-online-site) that the quarantine could result in higher cases of gender-based abuses. The PNP reported that during the quarantine period, there were [8 cases of rape a day](https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/05/25/2016374/8-raped-daily-during-quarantine-pnp) (https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/05/25/2016374/8-raped-daily-during-quarantine-pnp). This, however, is a lower statistic than the recorded 18 rape cases a day before the lockdown.

But the lower number may not be an accurate representation because of the lack of access to services, the restrictions on travel, and the apprehensions to fight against abusers during a time of national and global uncertainty.

In terms of online abuse, UN Women recognizes that there is still [a lack of global data on online and ICT-facilitated violence](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519) (https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519), but the international NGO does suggest that women are still disproportionately targeted. Meanwhile, IJM's report on OSEC uncovered that 86% of victims were females.

UN Women's [brief](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519) (https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519) on online violence against women during COVID-19 also presents that because of the 50% to 70% increase in internet usage, women and girls have been subject to a varied range of abuses — physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking, zoombombing ("showing of racially charged and sexually explicit material to the unexpected participants"), and sex trolling.

Alqaseer says that with Bantay Bastos, they found that there is indeed still a continuous increase in online abuse directed to women, but this has been a trend even before COVID-19. She shares that while reports on online sexual exploitation of children have risen, the Bantay Bastos page still generally receives more cases of adult women abused online.

"Mas marami paring babaeng nababastos. Mabilis mareport and action kapag children kasi clear na mali kapag bata," she says. "Pero kapag babae, minsan na-victim blame pa."

*\*name changed upon the interviewee's request*

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